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Anticipating the Exception, Not the Rule: Forming Policy For Student Use of Technology in the Classroom

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Abstract

Students across institutions of higher learning come equipped with pocket-sized devices that allow them to record images, audio, and video from their classrooms, and instantaneously edit and share recorded content with a limitless audience. Prior to commencing instruction, post-secondary instructors are advised to learn the policy of their institutions related to student use of technology, to anticipate student use of personal technological devices, to brainstorm possible eventualities, and to create and communicate careful, comprehensive classroom policy addressing student use of technology in their classrooms.

Introduction

Modern western culture is a culture of sharing. Post-secondary students inhabit a world of texting, Facebook, YouTube, Twitter and other social media in which personal messages are spontaneously broadcast to vast numbers of viewers and, consequently, student use of technology during instructional time has become widespread. In a recent survey of 269 university students from 21 academic majors, 95% reported always bringing a cell phone to class, 92% admitted to texting while in class, and more than half indicated a belief that instructors are largely unaware of the extent to which they text and engage in other cell phone activities during instructional time, including browsing the Internet, sending pictures, and accessing social networking sites (Tindell & Bohlander, 2012). Instructors should assume that all students in their classes could possess a smart phone, tablet or laptop, any of which can act as a discrete recording device right at their desks. Images, audio, and video captured during class time carry possible implications for students, instructors, and learning institutions. Even when no recordings occur, student use of personal technological devices in the classroom can produce potentially problematic situations.

Statement of the Problem and Purpose

What can instructors do to protect themselves, their students, and their institutions? The purpose of this article is not to recommend the implementation of strict one-size-fits-all rules, but, rather, to increase awareness of student technological capability and the potential ramifications. The ability to manipulate audio and video content and to otherwise use technology to create confounding circumstances for teachers is no longer the domain of a select few computer-savvy Ferris Bueller types. All students have access to a smorgasbord of free or low-cost easy-to-use apps and editing software for smart phones, tablets, and laptops that allows them to splice together photos and videos, add voiceovers and sound effects, and instantly upload finished products to the Internet.

The short turnaround time is important. If it took students more time to create and upload finished products, they would have more time to reflect and consider the ramifications of what they plan to share. Without careful consideration of the appropriateness of the material uploaded, the potential exists for students to post content that could get them into trouble. Additionally, sharing anything online can have lasting consequences; once the message or other content is out there, it has the potential of remaining forever in the online environment.

Student Use and Misuse of Technology in Classrooms

The saturation of portable technological devices in the post-secondary student population and the prevalence of wireless Internet access across institutions of higher learning make it inevitable that instructors will encounter incidences of student (mis)use of technology in their classrooms. It is advisable that all instructors immediately become versed in the policy of their institutions with regard to student use of technology. Any policy that instructors wish to compose to incorporate into their course syllabi must conform to institutional policy. It is uncommon, however, for colleges and universities to ban the use of cell phones and other personal technological devices as a policy; rather, policy is typically left to the discretion of individual faculty members (Tindell & Bohlander, 2012). Moreover, while many institutions require instructors to use a given syllabus format, such templates typically incorporate policy related to attendance, grading, and academic integrity; any policy related to student conduct, if it is included at all, may not address student use of technology in the classroom. Kay and Lauricella (2011) assert that in the absence of set protocol, uncertain instructors choose to either reject, ignore, or accept student use of technology in their classrooms, thus policy related to student use of technology during class is likely to be inconsistent across courses.

A salient issue related to student use of technology during class is whether it aids or interferes with learning. In one undergraduate student survey, student respondents who took lecture notes on a laptop reported using their laptop for other purposes, including checking email, instant messaging, surfing the Internet, and playing games, an average of 17 minutes out of each 75-minute class period (Fried, 2008). In another survey of 188 graduate students, 85% indicated that cell phones were a source of distraction during instructional time (Burns & Lohenry, 2010).

In one recent study, 92% of university students surveyed admitted to texting while in class (Tindell & Bohlander, 2012). The popular discourse on cell phone use while in class also reflects the prevalence of texting during class time. An Internet search of “texting in class” produces over 33 million hits, and the top results include articles on how to text without getting caught. One related joke that has gone viral reads, “Your teacher knows when you text. Seriously, no one just looks down at their crotch and smiles” (You Know You Are a Teacher When Quotes, n.d.). Some university professors have begun including “netiquette” rules in their syllabi, explaining how inappropriate technology use infringes on others’ learning environments (Bjorklund & Rehling, 2010). This frames student use of technology in the classroom as an interference-to-learning issue.

The flipside of interference-to-learning is technology as an aid to learning. Educational literature abounds with ways to enhance student learning with the purposeful use of cell phones, laptops, and tablets with Internet capability. McDonald (2012) suggested that laptops and tablets allow students to take notes quickly and efficiently. McLafferty (2000) included spontaneously

accessed information on the Internet with his class to seize teachable moments. Echeverria, Nussbaum, Calderon, Bravo, Infante and Vasquez (2011) had students use handheld computers to increase collaboration. Gaer (2011) incorporated text messaging, voice recordings using Google Voice, and student response systems into ESL instruction. Ferriter's (2010) students augmented their learning experience by using personal technological devices to replace needed supplies like dictionaries, timers, and digital cameras by recording the results of labs and taking still photos of procedures to insert into lab reports. Indeed, these examples represent just a small sampling of work from an ever-growing field of educational research investigating innovative ways to purposefully integrate student technology use during instructional time. Moreover, technology integration offers a valuable long-term benefit: immersing students in technology in the classroom better prepares them to use technology in their careers (McLafferty, 2000).

Despite the potential rewards of technology integration to in-class teaching and learning, educational researchers admit that there are real associated risks (Ferriter, 2010) and that explicitly teaching etiquette to students is crucial (Gaer, 2011). The following three vignettes have been created to illustrate that while post-secondary instructors may choose to reject or accept student use of technology in their classrooms, they should not ignore it.

Situation 1: A Secret Video Recording Made Public

All students in a course must make an individual 10-minute presentation in front of the class. One student elects to take a chance, risk the judgment of his classmates, and do something very different by dramatizing a soliloquy. He incorporates physical movements, different voices and accents, props, and onomatopoeia into his dramatization. Unbeknownst to everyone, one student covertly records his performance from her desk using her laptop. She then emails the recording to all of the students in the class. The instructor learns of this the following week when she overhears students discussing the recording.

The potential implications of such an incident are cause for alarm. With any luck, classmates would respond to the video with supportive and encouraging comments and the student, whose brave performance has been permanently captured and distributed without his knowledge or consent, would not react negatively or initiate formal action. But what if the recording made the performer the subject of ridicule? What if his performance was edited in such a way as to make him appear foolish? What if the recording found its way past his classmates and was reposted to a public site like YouTube?

The answers to these "what if" questions could change momentarily. Even if an email message or file is deleted, it could have been downloaded by any recipients in the group and retransmitted limitless times, in private or public form, to any number of recipients. Once it has been posted online, any recording, photo, or file of any type acquires the potential to last forever. It may be the case that most students who make class recordings would not use those recordings maliciously. It may also be that most classmates would comment respectfully in reference to those recordings. But there may always be exceptions and instructors are well advised to prepare for all potential outcomes, especially exceptional ones. Even when initial intentions are benign, recordings take on a life of their own in others' hands.

What can instructors do to prepare for such a situation? Every instructor should become intimate with the policy of his or her institution with respect to the use of recording devices. Where no policy exists, instructors should carefully create their policy on making recordings and explicitly communicate it to students in their course syllabi. As an additional measure, they may consider verbally reminding students of the class policy on recordings at the start of the term as well as prior to any student presentations.

Situation 2: Request for Permission to Make an Audio Recording

After class one day, a student approaches her instructor with a request. Can she make an audio recording of his lectures? She is a slow note taker and typist. In the past, other instructors have given her permission to make audio recordings to transcribe later at her own pace. This practice has enhanced her learning and her grades. The student does not have an identified learning disability, impairment, or other exceptionality, and as such, does not have official documentation from the institution granting her special accommodations.

In this instance, it may appear that because the student has not been given permission to make recordings as a learning accommodation, the decision to be recorded is the choice of the instructor. But is it? The institution may have strict policy against student-made audio recordings during instructional time, and other instructors may have been breaking the rules by allowing her request. Even where no such policy exists, it is not the only consideration. What if the instructor grants the student permission and other students are captured in the recordings? During breaks, transitions, and before and after class, students frequently conduct personal conversations and may be recorded sharing sensitive information without their knowledge or consent. Once permission is granted to one student, other students may request permission to do the same, and this could carry related implications. Further, audio recordings can be easily edited and shared online. Before giving a student the green light to press record, instructors should take the time to contemplate whether they are prepared for the possibility, however slight, that their lesson could be manipulated or distributed on the Internet.

Situation 3: A Student Response System is Used to Display Questionable Comments

A student is presenting a PowerPoint slideshow to her class. The final slide contains a link to an automatic audience response poll she has created using polleverywhere.com. A question at the top of the screen asks, "What will you miss the most after you graduate?" The student instructs her classmates to take out their cell phones and text their responses. Immediately, anonymous responses appear on the screen. At first they are cordial; answers include, "this class," and "my friends here." Then the tone changes. A statement appears, "Not this school" followed by, "I won't miss this hick town." Next someone posts a private joke that the instructor does not understand and some students start to snicker.

Although this situation does not pertain to recording or sharing class-time experiences online, it illustrates a different predicament that can arise from student use of technology in the classroom. Automatic audience response systems can be used by instructors not only as opinion polls (Gaer, 2011), but also to take attendance, give quizzes (Cleary, 2008), and gather feedback at the end of class electronically rather than through paper exit slips. The associated benefits of automatic opinion polls can include increased student participation as well as the gathering of formative

assessment information that can be used to monitor and adjust instruction. The anonymous and instantaneous nature of answers on open-response opinion polls, however, creates opportunities for students to display inappropriate messages without having to take personal responsibility. Although jokers and pranksters may represent the exception in the classroom, and not the rule, all it takes is one potentially embarrassing or even harmful incident to occur.

It has become increasingly commonplace for students to incorporate video, audio, and Internet content into class presentations. Often, instructors have not or cannot preview the appropriateness of the material. This is yet another reason why instructors are urged to understand the policy of their institutions and to communicate it to their students. Where no related policy exists, instructors are urged to consider associated risks to themselves, their students, and their institution, and carefully create their own policy. This policy should be articulated both in writing in their syllabi and as a verbal reminder prior to student presentations.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The situations discussed here represent a small sampling of how post-secondary students may wish to use personal technological devices in the classroom. Given the acceleration of technological change, these particular examples could become outdated and replaced by entirely new and unforeseeable predicaments. Only through an intimate understanding of institutional policy related to student use of technology can instructors make on-the-spot decisions that reflect it.

Institutional policymakers should continually review policies on student use of technology in the classroom based on related literature and instructor and student feedback. Instructors would benefit from ongoing professional development in technology-related institutional policies. Such professional development could be provided through online modules to be completed at the convenience of instructors, in the same manner that many universities currently offer workplace health and safety and Institutional Review Board training. Postsecondary administrators could offer support to new and experienced instructors alike by designating a knowledgeable individual or group of individuals as a contact to provide confidential advice for their concerns and questions related to creating and implementing classroom policies. Prior to commencing instruction, especially where such measures are not in place, post-secondary instructors are advised to anticipate student use of personal technological devices, to think through eventualities that could possibly occur, and to create and communicate careful, comprehensive classroom policy addressing student use of technology in their classrooms.

Further research on the purposeful use of personal technological devices in the classroom is recommended, as it may enhance student learning and can better prepare students for the workplace. Educational researchers in this area can work with instructors to develop and communicate policy informing student participants about what is and what is not acceptable and about technology etiquette. Whether instructors choose to accept or reject student use of technology, they are urged to consider the exception, not the rule, in order to form careful classroom policy that protects students, faculty, and in turn, institutions.

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